

A Historiography of Poverty: Social Concepts and Political Reactions


An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason Powell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'J' and 'P'.

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Abstract

The topic of welfare can start a doozy of a debate. The federal government's role in providing assistance to the needy is a complex and sensitive issue. Why can't our society seem to solve the problem of poverty? This thesis follows a historiographical approach to analyze poverty through two lenses, one social and the other political, because both social understandings of poverty and the political reactions to poverty have changed over time. Using popular (non-scholarly) literature, this work moves through the history of poverty, then into the era of Clinton welfare reform and beyond. The argument of the thesis is that societal views on the causes of poverty have been consistently reductionist and thus, government solutions have been insufficient. The work concludes with possible government solutions and possible courses of action for the reader to take to work for a sustainable end to poverty.

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The Poverty Debate

To say that welfare has been a point of contention between American liberals and conservatives in years past would be an understatement. The subject of the federal government's role in providing financial support, food, work, housing, and other forms of assistance to the nation's needy is sure to raise hackles in any debate. Most, if not all, Americans believe that at least some portion of the impoverished are poor through no fault of their own and deserve help in some form in order to survive. Beyond this basic agreement, however, it is hard to settle upon a plan of action that can hold any popular support as to the treatment of the needy. How poor is poor? Under what circumstances should a person become eligible for help? Which poor people are deserving and which lazy? What entities should provide aid? Should we spend tax dollars or rely on donations? What kind of aid is most helpful to poor families? What kind of aid is deserved? How will aid be distributed? Can we avoid encouraging negative behaviors when we give free handouts? Such a complex issue is full of questions, only some of which I will be able to address in this work. I will provide a brief history of social understandings of poverty and political reactions to poverty, and then focus on the general issue of how American society and government can restructure its views of poverty and implement policies that can deal effectively with poverty and the problems associated with it.

Methods

The answers to these questions vary from one person to another, according to the person's views, and this is as it should be. We live in a democratic republic, after all, and we

should form opinions, debate with each other, and vote for representatives who will put our views into law. But how do people form opinions about a topic such as welfare? If someone simply wants to spout off an opinion, he will copy quips from parents, friends, television personalities, or talk radio. If he has deeper concerns than these answers can satisfy, he may even surf the internet to see what can be found on Google or Wikipedia and form an opinion based on his “research” – albeit from sources that may have shaky credentials. If the sources matter to a person, however, the next step up is to read books on the subject. It is in this intellectual realm that this thesis dwells, because this is the amount of effort that a well-educated but busy voter might be willing to make in order to become informed on a topic that he held in particular interest. It stops short of the academic’s peer-reviewed expertise, but still promises reliable information in readily readable form. For this reason, I am using popular (non-scholarly) literature to inform my research.

I use a historiographical approach to analyze how social understanding of poverty changes over time and the successive political reactions to those understandings. The books published at any given time reflect the prevailing beliefs of their day. The sources used in this paper are no different. I will first look at three texts to gain background and perspective in the shifting social understandings of poverty. Then, I will examine the same sources to extract the political reactions that have risen from the changes in social perception.

I will then move into the recent past. In Bill Clinton’s presidential acceptance speech, given in 1992, he promised to “end welfare as we know it.” I use five more books published in the years surrounding the Clinton reforms to examine the present views of American society, and then, the government’s actions in accordance with those views. I will argue that the government’s and society’s views on the causes of poverty have been consistently reductionist

and thus, their solutions are doomed to be insufficient. In closing, I will add my insights into solutions to the problems of poverty.

Social Understandings of Poverty in History

Hospitality and generosity have been considered admirable qualities since the earliest of written histories. In *From Poor Law to Welfare State* Walter I. Trattner argues that concern for the poor, especially poor children, has probably been a part of society since societies began. Examples can be found the world over. Buddhism began teaching love and charity around 400 B.C. Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers included charity and philanthropy in their discussions of living a good life, and their societies also had means of providing for people who were crippled or poor or for children who were orphaned (1-2). If we narrow our search and follow the traditional American heritage path, we can trace ideas of poverty and welfare from Judaism to Christianity, from Greece to the Roman Empire, then through Europe with a special focus on England before we move to the Americas.

Judeo-Christian teachings also demand that attention be paid to the wellbeing of the needy. Indeed, Jewish doctrines teach the “*duty* of giving and... the *right* of those in need to receive [emphasis in the original]” (Trattner 2). Both the well-off and the needy are responsible for their part of either giving or receiving. This process comes out of a sense of justice – it is just, right, fair that all should have enough. The Torah and other holy and legal writings abound with stories of charity and the rules concerning it (Trattner 2-3).

Thus, out of Judaism, Christianity inherited this view of charity, seeing it as a holy responsibility. Reading the Bible, we see many stories of charity in the New Testament, as well as in the Old. The early Christian communities were small and close-knit, and its members were

able to care for one another as needs arose. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, increased membership and disparity in wealth of those members required church leaders to formalize the system of giving and receiving. Monasteries became centers for charity throughout Europe (Trattner 3-4).

With the deterioration of the Roman Empire and the rise of feudalism, virtually everyone became part of a fixed hierarchy that also served as a safety net. The majority of people were serfs, or poor workers who owned no land. Though serfs had little freedom in their low status, they also usually received protection from their lords, not only from attack, but from destitution as well. According to Trattner, poverty was perceived as a permanent fixture of society and there was little shame to be felt at having few material possessions or in needing help. People did not have “jobs,” but everyone worked, whether in the field, in the home, in the workshop, or on the manor (4-6).

As the feudal system deteriorated, Europe transitioned into monarchy. During this shift, those who moved into cities were removed from the feudal system. Here, guilds took the responsibility of caring for their own members and for those outside the fold who were in desperate need. Monasteries continued to provide charity and many added hospitals that provided care for the poor who became ill, for lepers, for travelers, for the children and the elderly who lacked family support, and for others who temporarily or permanently needed assistance. Bishops also collected a compulsory tithe from the population and distributed funds to parish priests who were responsible for easing need in their communities (Trattner 4-5).

The development of nation-states from feudal manors caused many changes to this fairly secure arrangement. Society, the economy, the government, and the church gradually changed because of events and trends such as increased international trade, the Black Plague, the rise of

the money economy, the Protestant Reformation, the switch from agricultural to wage labor, and the Industrial Revolution. No longer were serfs able to live securely on their lord's manor. Now they were forced from the land and this "resulted in an increase in unemployment, poverty, vagabondage, begging and thievery," especially in the cities, where the landless gathered (Trattner 7).

Now that history has led us to the land in question, we can follow the well-known periods in American history like chapters from a text book: the Colonial Era, the Revolutionary War, Westward Expansion, the Civil War, the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era, the World Wars and Depression, and Cold War Era.

With the founding of Jamestown in 1607, English practices took root in America. At first, mutual aid sufficed for the small populations of individual settlements. But, as cities grew, so did populations of those unwilling or unable to contribute to society. The public took responsibility. The only circumstance in which towns were not generous to the needy was when the needy were new arrivals. They accepted caring for their neighbors, but they shirked any extra responsibilities that might be added on account of wandering vagabonds (Trattner 19).

The era of the American Revolution saw private donations to the poor, personally and through charities, take center stage in the aid-giving department. Various church groups organized to provide for those affected by the upheaval. Indeed, Trattner argues, the ideas of the Great Awakening, the Enlightenment, and the Revolution caused an overall feeling of personal power and social responsibility. Humanism ideals made care for the less fortunate seem quite honorable (33-36).

Once the War for Independence was won, the frontier opened up, along with promises of opportunity for a better life out West. Those who did not prosper were not viewed in such a

favorable light as they had been previously. There was growing sentiment that while some of the poor were pitiable and deserving of help, others were simply slothful and unworthy. As Iceland notes, “Rugged individualism was the ideal, and able-bodied poor people were thought to be lazy and morally degenerate” (120). There was even worry that in city slums lurked a degenerate population so poor and lazy, as to be corrupting the good working class men and women around them. (Iceland 13). To counter the perceived personal deficiencies in the poor, charitable societies aimed at improving the character of the needy, rather than changing their circumstances. Such societies, often considered scientific in their time, grew in prevalence (Trattner 68).

The end of the Civil War saw another group of people fall into the category of “undeserving poor,” though they were no strangers to hardship. According to Iceland, government efforts to aid newly freed blacks were short lived. Without help, African Americans in the South became entangled in sharecropping. Those who traveled to the cities formed their own aid societies within the black community to care for those who could not care for themselves (120).

As the trends of industrialization and urbanization reached fever pitch, so did immigration. European immigrants poured into the country. Iceland argues that the rise of laissez faire ideology increased views of the poor as personally deficient. (20). Progressive Era reformers set about their work of improving social welfare, and improving the poor themselves. Trattner agrees, noting that settlement houses went to work Americanizing the immigrants and indoctrinating them with middle class values (167).

Progressives teamed up with state and local government to address public problems such as health and sanitation, unsafe workplace conditions, and the education and treatment of

children. Along with this increased attention to welfare, DeParle argues that concerns about child abuse in orphan asylums also generated action. Progressives decided that the best course of action would be to provide for women so that they could care for their children without entering the labor force. However, society only wished to give to the worthy poor, so to be judged “fit” mothers usually had to be widowed rather than divorced, have children only within wedlock, and be white (86).

The Great Depression taught a greater proportion of Americans than ever before a first hand lesson about poverty. While charities and governments fumbled, unable to address the overwhelming need, Trattner notes that social workers discovered a new perspective. From the vantage point of such a historic economic low, it became clear that social and economic factors were much more to blame for the dire situation of so many families than were any personal failings of the poor. They became distraught that their profession had spent so long dealing with poverty one family at a time instead of working toward an end to the condition (274-275). Iceland adds that as the crisis wore on, it “became quite evident that at least some of the new poverty resulted from social and economic factors that the needy could not control” (122). With this new understanding, there came a call for government action.

Once Roosevelt became president, he took decisive action. It was not without detractors. The Social Security Act was challenged in the U.S. Supreme Court in two different cases, but it was upheld. Trattner argues that with the Supreme Court’s endorsement, in theory at least, poverty was officially moved out of the category of personal problems and into those of social and economic problems (293).

When the United States entered World War II, Trattner observes that “[c]oncern with poverty seemed remote and almost antiquarian” (308). Even after the war, it seemed that success

was the norm and there was no more need. Because mainstream America enjoyed prosperity, the commonly held belief was that poverty had been beaten. No further social reform was necessary.

In fact, if a person wanted reform, he or she might be a Communist (Trattner 308-309).

However, as Iceland notes, African Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, and even some rural whites were left out of the prosperity that characterized the 1940s and '50s. Not until the Civil Rights Movement was light shed upon those missing out (124).

While the nation floated along complacently, welfare programs were expanding in benefits and in usage. And, as DeParle notes, the average recipient was no longer a white widow and her children, but often a minority family tainted by a divorced or never-married mother with children born out of wed-lock (87). These social outcasts were certainly not the people that laws like ADC were originally meant to help, and they were also not the kind of people for whom the public wanted to think about or feel sympathy.

However, by the end of the 1950s, the public was forced to open its eyes to the plight of poor minorities. As the Civil Rights Movement gained national attention, rights, race, and poverty became the topics of focus. Academics and politicians alike turned their efforts toward equality for all. According to Trattner, however, the majority of the measures passed at the time

“failed to deal with the social, economic, and demographic forces that were responsible for the increase in the welfare rolls. Instead, they were based on the idea that the economic wellbeing of the period could lead to the abolition of poverty if only the poor would take advantage of the opportunities before them; hence they were designed to... reinforce commitment to the work ethic by those who were economically marginal, a clear shift away from the many cash and public works programs of the New Deal” (321).

DeParle argues that the inner-city riots that arose in the mid-1960s originated amongst those long-downtrodden groups who heard discussion and promises but did not see results. The welfare rights movement demanded entitlement to welfare as a human right. There were demonstrations and lawsuits (88-90). A few federal employment programs tried to appease ghetto inhabitants, but the most notable reaction was to augment existing police forces and their weapons. Hearing of such unrest while spending climbed, the public drew the conclusion that something was truly wrong with these people, Trattner explains, because it seemed that they were getting more but still could not take care of themselves. On top of this exasperation was piled racism. The public's awareness of the changed demographics of welfare users hardened into the stereotype of the single black woman with a brood of illegitimate children bound for delinquency (319-331).

Through the 1970s and 1980s, the stereotype prevailed and even grew. Politicians spoke of dependency. Private and public approaches toward the problem maintained the goal of reinforcing work ethic because popular wisdom still maintained that the poor were poor because they failed to act on abundant opportunities. On top of this, however, government and citizen alike added another conclusion – that welfare was to blame for their complacency.

Political Actions Aimed at Poverty in History

The first code of law to which we can look back is from Babylon, two thousand years before Christ. Hammurabi's Code includes instructions to care for the weak, for widows, and for orphans (Trattner 1). But, following the traditional American heritage view, our mainstream legal and moral roots grow out of Judeo-Christian customs, so that is where we will begin investigating political attempts to address the problem of poverty.

The Jews were a people who fell under the rule of several other powers, but who nonetheless, always struggled to maintain their own religion and follow their own laws. Within Hebrew society, religious teachings were the “law.” Religion and politics were intertwined to the point that it was hard to tell the two apart. Thus, Jews were legally and morally bound to help one another. Christianity was born out of this tradition but grew under Roman government, so Christianity’s response to poverty was less political and more moral and religious.

Eventually, however, Christianity outlived the Roman Empire and as feudalism and then monarchy took their turns in Europe, Christian teachings influenced politics a great deal. Within the structure of feudalism, lords had a vested interest in the wellbeing of their serfs because they relied upon them as laborers and as soldiers. Although they bore no legal responsibility to maintain a certain standard of living for their vassals, it was in their best interests to provide for those who served them. According to Trattner, the church also provided relief to the poor as a “*public* institution” funded by the tithe – a “*compulsory* tax [emphases in the original]” (5).

Towards feudalism’s end, our narrative turns to the England where the wool industry was beginning to take off. As feudal manors were being turned into pastures for sheep, serfs were forced off the land. Laborers were left to wander and find wage work. England’s “welfare” legislation began after the Black Plague and the labor shortage it caused. The 1349 measure limited the mobility of workers and set maximum wages (Trattner 6-8).

In the 1500s, England wrote several laws to control mobility, begging, and vagrancy, as well as to care for the poor and infirm. These culminated in the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601. Though this law put care first, rather than control, as had been the case with previous legislation, it included a section delegating the responsibility for the poor to appointed members of each community. Designees were responsible for finding apprenticeships for children who had no one

to care for them, for finding work for the unemployed, and for collecting taxes that would provide those opportunities, as well as provide care for those unable to work. Those who would not pay the tax could be imprisoned. The law stated that children were to be apprenticed until they reached adulthood and that facilities could be built to house those incapable of work. If a parish did not have enough money to accomplish these tasks, neighboring communities had to contribute additional funds. The law also held families legally responsible for the care of three generations – children, parents, and grandparents (Aschrott 7).

In Colonial America, different areas handled the needy differently, but it was commonplace to have either town officials or local church officials use tax monies to care for those in need. Families would take in an elderly widow for a time, doctors would provide free medical care in return for lower taxes or a payment from the town, taxes would be lowered for those unable to support their families with the added burden, and work would be found for the able-bodied (Trattner 16-19).

Trattner notes that, while they accepted the burden of caring for their neighbors, townsfolk dodged any extra burden by adding residency requirements into laws governing the treatment of the destitute. Port cities took measures to prevent themselves from being inundated by ill and penniless travelers. Ships' captains were required to register all their passengers and pay bail for those who might not be self-sufficient. Needy transients also came into the Eastern cities in the form of refugees fleeing from frontier wars or scuffles with Indians (19-21).

According to Trattner, the rule of local responsibility reigned through the Revolutionary War. During the war, as individual areas became overwhelmed, the states stepped in to provide aid to places that were hard-hit. Though the help was usually financial, some states began administering some of the first assistance programs (39-40).

One action that the government took, once independence was won, was to make land available at cheap prices for anyone who could get out West. While not a measure aimed at reducing poverty, it nonetheless provided opportunity for the less advantaged members of society, prevented a landed aristocracy from forming, and fostered self-reliance. No longer a nation fighting for freedom, but one with excess land, the spirit of Humanism gave way and America developed a national character devoted to rugged individualism (Trattner 43).

In the early 1800s, as America's industrial revolution ignited, many farmers and craftsmen found that their services were no longer needed in their professions. They traveled the boundless nation. Some stopped when they found a job, others kept wandering. For the truly desperate, there number of poorhouses was increasing. They were usually run by counties or states. In a poorhouse, one would be cared for, but would usually also be forced to work because work was viewed as moral and thus might help reform a vagrant's immoral ways. Some poorhouses had deplorable conditions, while some were passable (Iceland 12).

After the Civil War, the government initially aided two groups: veterans and former slaves. Union veterans received government benefits for the rest of their lives. Initially, the Freedman's Bureau attempted to give aid to and find jobs for new black citizens. However, those efforts only lasted until 1872 (Iceland 121). Iceland notes that Jim Crow laws and the threat of violence kept African Americans from wage earning jobs, while effective disenfranchisement kept them from changing their circumstances. Thus began the great migration north. But the economic picture for blacks in northern cities was only slightly less bleak (14).

During the Progressive Era that followed, concerned citizens and governments worked together to address several areas of urban life. Concern for public health rose and tuberculosis was attacked as public enemy number one. Then diphtheria and venereal diseases came under

fire in the 1920s (Trattner 147-163). Workers' compensation for the injured became common state law (Iceland 122). Movements for child welfare limited child labor (Trattner 134). States started mothers' pensions so that poor children could be raised in their own homes. Thorough screenings permitted only a few "fit" (white, widows, with children born within wedlock) mothers to take advantage of this arrangement (DeParle 86).

After the stock market crashed in 1929, private charities met the initial response to the exponential growth of need. But the funds quickly ran out, and it became apparent that a nationwide problem was going to require a nation-wide response. Because President Hoover did not take decisive enough action, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected in 1932. By 1933, the unemployment rate had soared to 24.9 percent. FDR's New Deal legislation targeted the unemployed, unions, small farmers, migratory workers, the elderly, and housing authorities in the form of jobs, guarantees, and grants. The most famous of this batch of legislation was the Social Security Act, passed in 1935. It included social insurance for the aged, public assistance for the jobless, support for youth with disabilities, and Aid to Dependent Children (Iceland 122-123).

At this time, according to DeParle, Aid to Dependent Children merely provided federal funding to the state programs (known as Mothers' Pensions), leaving states wide latitude as to how high or low to set their benefits and how to determine "fitness." In the South, especially, this led to discriminatory practices, with 96 percent of Mothers' Pension recipients being white. Congressmen from Southern states knew their constituents would not be happy if a federal program provided income for black women. That would cut into their abundant supply of cheap labor. So their representatives went to great lengths to keep federal supervision out of the picture (86-87).

In 1940, welfare was a small program, serving about 2 percent of the nation's children, predominately in white families. Between 1945 and 1960, though, caseloads grew by almost 300 percent. Gradually, benefits grew, eligibility extended higher up the levels of income, and racial discrimination became less and less acceptable. As welfare became more helpful and more accessible to mothers of diverse backgrounds, large numbers of black families and other minorities also moved into northern cities, where they faced less fierce discrimination. Another factor in the changing demographics of welfare recipients was Congress's decision to, as journalist Jason DeParle put it, "[cream] off the 'worthy poor'" by allowing widows to draw from Social Security instead of taking Aid to Dependent Children (87). As a result, the composition of welfare recipients changed gradually from being over 90 percent white to only about 50 percent white, from being mostly widows and orphans to mothers and children from "broken homes" (DeParle 86-87).

The complacency of the postwar era ended when John F. Kennedy ran for President in 1960, and made ending poverty and inequality part of his platform. Aid to Dependent Children expanded to Aid to Families with Dependent Children, allowing struggling two parent families to qualify for assistance. Public Welfare Amendments to the Social Security Act improved federal funding for AFDC and funded social services that were supposed to come with the assistance. The Area Redevelopment Act tried to entice industry to depressed areas. Johnson followed Kennedy's lead, signing more acts aiming economic development at problem regions, preventing employment discrimination, and finally declaring a War on Poverty (Trattner 319-322).

The War on Poverty produced extensive amounts of legislation, but, Trattner argues, few if any desirable (by any definition) results. The Economic Opportunity Act was passed in 1964, containing measures that would invest in human capital through programs like Operation Head

Start, Upward Bound, Job Corps, Community Youth Corps, and Volunteers in Service to America. The grand scheme was severely under funded, however. The funds allotted to the entire nation were less than even one major city would need to effectively run these programs. What money there was wound up captive within the bureaucracy that was put in place to organize the programs; hardly any of it went to those in need. Medicare and Medicaid were enacted in 1965. Both were improvements over previous programs, but fell far short of covering the array of medical care that its users often needed and also fell short of covering all those who needed help to afford their medical treatments. The Elementary and Secondary Education and Higher Education Acts were signed into law in 1965, as was a rent-supplementing program. In 1966, the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act coordinated public building projects. Still, the amount spent on social services and the number of people receiving them climbed to what many considered unacceptable heights, with few tangible improvements to make it seem worthwhile (322-328).

The 1970s proved a mixed bag for social welfare, starting with Nixon's presidency. He suggested a guaranteed income for impoverished families in his Family Assistance Plan. But he let the idea go, and Congress could only agree that it was unsatisfactory – for every reason under the sun, depending on what group was asked (Trattner 338-341). What Nixon did support was programs to sustain the worthy' poor: the Earned Income Tax for low income workers, indexed benefits for the elderly on Social Security, and legislation to prevent discrimination against the disabled (Iceland 125). When Nixon resigned under the black cloud of the Watergate scandal, Ford took office. He vetoed several laws that would increase spending on social issues, and focused unsuccessfully on inflation (Trattner 351-351). The Carter administration proposed

comprehensive welfare reform and a national health care program, but he failed to secure passage for either one, even with a Democratic Congress (Trattner 354-358).

Under Reagan, the welfare budget was trimmed and states were encouraged to try different compulsory work and job training programs. Initial studies showed favorable results in most states that were evaluated. This seemed to be a compromise that liberals and conservatives in Congress could live with: spend more up front and require more from welfare recipients. By the end of his presidency, the Family Support Act was signed, creating the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills program and giving states matching funds for whatever they spent on it, up to \$1 million. Vice President George Bush put his weight behind the measure to ensure its' success. With the Family Support Act signed into law under Reagan, Bush had also ensured that his own presidency would be devoid of any efforts at antipoverty legislation (DeParle 98-100, 105).

Bill Clinton followed up on his 1992 campaign promise to "end welfare as we know it" with his 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. This new law abolished AFDC, replacing that program with a series of smaller grants to states. It set a two year limit to a recipient's stint on the rolls, regardless of circumstance, and an additional limit of five years total assistance for anyone's lifetime. Medicare, the Earned Income Tax Credit, housing subsidies, and programs for the disabled remained in place, but this reform ended 60 years of federal policy guaranteeing a minimum level of assistance to the nation's needy (Iceland 126).

Recent Social Understandings of Poverty

Now that I have laid the groundwork to look at poverty as both a political and social problem in the past, I will present the ideas surrounding Clinton's reforms. I will look at five

books published between 1993 and 2005 and organize the authors' critiques and suggestions through both social and political lenses. I will start with the social critiques.

In her 1993 book *Tyranny of Kindness: Dismantling the Welfare System to End Poverty in America*, Theresa Funiciello confronts American society with its contradictions. She compares the funding and political treatment that Social Security and AFDC have received over their lifespan. Social Security is popular – America's favorite child – and cutting its benefits will be the end of the politicians who orchestrate such a measure. AFDC is the nation's ugly stepchild. Everyone attacks it, its benefits have fallen in terms of purchasing power, and those associated with it become immediately stigmatized. And yet, theoretically, the difference between the two is only in whom they serve: senior citizens or single mothers and their children (Funiciello 266-268). She argues that every mother works, even if her labors are not rewarded economically. Caring for children is a job and the government should provide the resources for its completion. After all, no one worries about widows growing dependent upon social security's payments. Society allows them to care for their children and get a job if and when they are comfortable doing so (Funiciello 269-272).

Mark Rank wrote *Living on the Edge: the Realities of Welfare in America* in 1994, as a study to examine what facts would be truly representative of the people who receive welfare. In preparing for his study, Rank identified three theoretical causes of poverty. (1) Some people see individual failings as the cause of a person's poverty through a lack of motivation or through a lack of skills. (2) Others will argue that poverty has cultural causes, blaming either the culture of poverty or the destitute's cultural isolation from the mainstream of America. (3) Still others point their fingers to structural causes (Rank 25-34).

There are several views about what parts of society's structure is to blame. (1) Marx blamed the structure of capitalism and saw poverty as an unavoidable pitfall of such a system. (2) Dual labor market theory arose in the 1970s and posits that there is one labor market (mostly inhabited by white males) that provides highly stable careers at high wages, and another (mostly inhabited by white women and racial minorities of both sexes) that provides an unstable string of low-paying jobs. (3) Functionalism argues that poverty is convenient for society (filling undesirable jobs, providing helping professions, etc), and fixing poverty would be inconvenient to the powerful and affluent. (4) There is also the recent "Big Brother argument," stating that government assistance causes poverty by encouraging dependency and other negative behaviors. (Rank 34-35)

Rank assesses the journey through welfare with empirical evidence gained through data, interviews, and fieldwork. His findings challenge American stereotypes of those on public assistance. Contrary to the popular image, welfare provides only minimal assistance and people receiving it still struggle tremendously. Also potentially shocking, welfare's effects on perceived negative behavioral traits turned out to be negligible in his findings. Family changes such as divorce or having children are not more likely for those on welfare than for those in the general population. General wisdom also holds that the vast majority of welfare recipients are single moms, but in fact they are only about a quarter of those on welfare. Female-headed families, married couples, singles, and the elderly, all represent a major portion of welfare recipients. Another finding that may be hard to believe is that there is no intrinsic moral defect in the poor. Rank finds that all but a few hold on to the American dream of success through hard work and they are eager to exit welfare programs. In short, Rank observes that welfare recipients are just

not that different from the rest of America – welfare is their last ditch effort, as it would be for any other American (Rank 168-173).

Thus, he finds little support for most of the theories discussed earlier. There is nothing wrong with individuals' motivation. The Big Brother argument fails to hold water, because people on welfare do not start making destructive decisions because they are on welfare. Dependency or laziness plays a factor only in a very small percentage of welfare recipients. Rank also dismisses cultural theories, because the needy possess very similar hopes, dreams, goals, and values to those found in mainstream culture. He reminds us that inner-city residents who require assistance (included in his study, but not its focus) are only a small portion of the total welfare rolls. Thus, he cannot rule out the possibility that cultural forces play a more significant part in the poverty of that small portion of people who live inside major metropolitan areas (Rank 174-175).

Rank does, however find support for the idea that individuals' lack of skills leaves them vulnerable. Lack of resources and human capital does not cause welfare use, but it does make it more likely. People in this category have less to keep them afloat when a crisis strikes – the car breaks down, someone gets sick, there is a divorce, a parent loses a job – than do their middle and upper class counterparts. And, as the economy bumps along, those with the least amount of human capital are the first to fall off the raft of economic wellbeing. But most factors causing poverty and welfare use, Rank finds, are outside the control of any one person. Indeed, “why do some people lack human capital to begin with?” (Rank 180). His answer is, in short, that the social, political, and economic systems of this country reproduce social classes generation after generation, with little effort to enhance mobility or cushion the fall when those whom it keeps at the bottom finally lose their grip (Rank 176-185).

Benjamin I. Page and James R. Simmons assert that the causes of the poverty problem must be addressed. In their work *What Government Can Do: Dealing with Poverty and Inequality*, published in 2000, Page and Simmons observe that “high and increasing levels of poverty and inequality of income and wealth” in the United States have damaging consequences for individuals and the nation (8). They paint their picture of poverty thus:

“...poor people are largely invisible to the middle-class majority. Most of us consciously or unconsciously form images of poverty based on misleading TV images. For this reason, it may be worth repeating: many more poor people are white than black. Very few live in urban ghettos. Few live in families with never-married mothers. Most have a worker in the family. ...one-third of Americans experience poverty at some time, [and] the poor are a very diverse and heterogeneous lot” (Page and Simmons 21).

Author Barbara Ehrenreich spent three months living as a member of this diverse population. Ehrenreich lived in three different cities, worked a series of dead-end jobs, and tried to live on her earnings. She published *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* in 2001 based on her experiences. The book was a way of evaluating the perceived premise of Clinton-era welfare reform: that as soon as welfare recipients learned to get themselves to work everyday, they would make enough to support themselves without state aid. So, Ehrenreich found cheap apartments, skimmed on her food budget, and splurged on only work-related expenses. In one city, she found it nearly impossible to make rent unless she worked two jobs, which she did for a time. But, she could not work two waitressing jobs, which kept her on her feet for long hours, without her performance suffering at both. On her next try, she almost made it. She worked for a cleaning company during the week and at a nursing home during the

weekends. However, her living situation would not have been sustainable much past that month, as her weekly rent would have gone up soon. During these first two tries, nothing went wrong – no injuries, no car trouble, no personal crises. She arrived in her third city during the middle of a housing shortage and spent unsustainable amounts living in a hotel until she could find an apartment. She worked at Wal-Mart, but needed additional income. She could not find another job, however, nor could she arrange her schedule at Wal-Mart in a way that would give her the weekly time off necessary for a second job. She came to the conclusion that even if one does everything right, it is still almost impossible to make ends meet (Ehrenreich 196-198).

In order to make the task of survival more manageable, David K. Shipler argues for a complex and comprehensive network of government, private business, and charity working in cooperation to provide aid for all the overlapping causes and effects of poverty. Debuting in 2005, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* documents Shipler's investigation into lives touched by poverty. In his last chapter, "Skill and Will," he holds employers and employees, teachers and students, bureaucrats, politicians, and the poor themselves responsible for the plight of the underprivileged. He goes on to declare, "All the problems have to be attacked at once" (Shipler 285). Properly addressing the "constellation of difficulties that magnify one another," he argues, is not possible with the present approach of providing aid for one difficult situation at a time (Shipler 285).

Recent Political Actions Aimed at Poverty

All of the authors whose works I have discussed above make policy suggestions. They range from the parsimonious to the complex, sometimes within the same work, but they all expect government to step up and take responsibility for our nation's needy.

Funiciello's ultimate argument is that the "real need of poor families to live with dignity can only be met" with guaranteed income (Funiciello 262). This is not a new idea, and she outlines its consideration and then its suppression throughout the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. Nixon was actually the one to present a bill that would have provided guaranteed income, but each lobby could find something wrong with the plan and, in the end, neither the President nor Congress found it politically viable. She argues that it is always politics that thwarts this ideal solution (Funiciello 277).

She outlines a few different forms that a guaranteed income could take. In order to replace branching bureaucracies that are inefficient and ineffective, there could be child allowances, or family allowances, giving each family a government check worth a certain amount per child or per family member. There could be a negative income tax, setting a certain amount of money that each family should live upon and taxing those who make more, while paying out to those who make less, making sure that every family has at least that national minimum (Funiciello 298-301). As far as social services for the needy, she suggests vouchers for poor families, who could choose to spend federal money on whatever services they choose. In this way, for example, welfare mothers could shop for produce at local markets or grocery stores instead of going to sub-standard soup kitchens and food pantries (Funiciello 306-307).

Funiciello sees these solutions as having positive economic implications. Putting money in the hands of poor families will create consumers. Consumers spend their money and exert their influence in their local markets. This can fix broken neighborhoods; make it possible to care for homes and businesses that make up a real estate market's value. It also might shrink crime rates, as one would not feel forced into a life of crime to keep one's family afloat financially. The nation would also save on domestic expenses, as it would no longer be necessary to publicly

fund vast networks of social services for the poor. Guaranteed income would subsume Social Security and make price subsidies like those on dairy products unnecessary. And, it could theoretically pay for itself in public money saved and increased income taxes from the wealthy (Funiciello 311-315).

Rank suggests focusing on reducing “the number of losers,” produced by our systems, rather than enhancing human capital for some, which will only give them a better chance at mobility and keep consistent the number of those who cannot manage (Rank 185). He suggests three employment policies: aggregate demand policies, which would stimulate creation of more jobs; comprehensive job training programs; and public service employment or government-created jobs. He also borrows Michael Sherraden’s idea of “Individual Development Accounts,” which would help poor people amass assets in long-term bank accounts with restricted access. Some kind of extension of the Earned Income Tax Credit idea into areas such as child care would also be helpful, along the lines of Sheldon Danziger’s suggestions. Rank also sees need for policies that would cushion those going through changes in family structure. Improved child support policies assuring abundant, affordable high-quality child care, improved parenting education, better sex education courses, and easier access to contraceptives, are all measures he endorses. He also supports the idea of universal health care as a necessary support for the needy. His final suggestions center on community development initiatives to strengthen schools, businesses, banks, etc. (Rank 188-197). He believes that thoughtful action is necessary. With so many in such dire straights, Rank says, “We simply do not have the luxury to continue with our cardboard characterizations of 20 percent of our population” (204). Knowing the causes of poverty and the people who suffer within it, we can create the proper structures to uphold society so that fewer will slip through the cracks.

Page and Simmons look optimistically at the rolls federal, state, and local governments can and do play in easing poverty in the United States. The majority of Americans want better funding for education, Social Security, medical care, and the environmental protections, but they do not trust government to act responsibly and listen to its people in an increasingly global economic market. While the authors acknowledge that globalization may create challenges, they maintain that people can indeed affect change through their governments. They evaluate policies and propose new ones on the topics of social insurance, taxes, education, jobs and wages, and safety nets for basic needs. They suggest designs for effective policies, ways of organizing to enact those policies, and ways to remove political barriers that stand in the way of those policies. The main barrier they see is the way money influences elections, and they encourage readers to take action to reduce its influence (Page and Simmons 1-8).

They argue that government is responsible for caring for its people, including their economic security, and acknowledge challenges including the globalizing of the economy, the class bias present in voting habits, and the power that corporations and interest groups hold over elections – noting that this is the case in both parties (Page and Simmons 61-74). They then devote a chapter each to social insurance programs, fair tax policies, education and developing human capital, jobs and wages that are sufficient for the needs of all, and safety nets that provide basic needs for those in crisis.

Overall, Page and Simmons find some policies that have produced favorable results. Social Security's retirement benefits keep millions of the elderly from poverty, and it works efficiently, though it will need further funding than is in place presently. Social Security's Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income have similar effects upon the disabled. Medicare and Medicaid do a fairly good job of giving aid in providing medical care for senior

citizens and the needy. The Earned Income Tax Credit is another effective government policy, encouraging work and distributing cash to those who earn too little to live on. And, while everyone agrees that schools need to be improved, the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides important resources for helping education be a road out of poverty, at least for some. Childhood health and nutrition programs, Head Start, special education programs, and vocational training programs all improve the lives of those they work with, providing society with “returns on the investment in terms of lifelong reductions in income maintenance payments, increased productivity, and more fulfilling lives” (Page and Simmons 292). The authors support federal efforts to encourage economic growth and provide public service jobs. They see minimum wage laws and antidiscrimination legislation as helpful measures toward fair employment practices. Food Stamps are available to almost anyone in need, and they have improved nutrition and reduced hunger. These accomplishments prove that government can do some things right and they provide templates for future programs that might meet other needs (Page and Simmons 290-293).

What Government Can Do also sets a general ‘to do list’ for our society. Page and Simmons outline approaches to “advancing equal opportunity, investing in human capital, ensuring that jobs are available at good wages, providing social insurance, redistributing income, and providing basic necessities” (Page and Simmons 293). If we expect everyone to work for their living, the nation must have improved, expanded, and well-funded health and education programs for children. And, rather than leaving poor areas to fend for themselves, the government must either force socioeconomic integration or compensate for poor local funds by increasing government spending to be more than equal to the spending in wealthy communities. On the employment front, government policy should provide enough jobs for all able-bodied

people, and those jobs should pay enough income that workers can afford life's necessities.

Income disparity should be forcibly reduced through legal limitations. To provide cradle to grave for the population, government-provided insurance should protect against circumstances, accidents, and disasters that periodically or permanently prevent people from caring for themselves. Then, for the few who still need it, a floor below which none can fall should guarantee subsistence through food, shelter, medical care, and perhaps even a guaranteed cash income (Page and Simmons 293-300).

Finally, Page and Simmons tackle the obstacles to improved social welfare evident in our economy and government. They argue that globalization is a much more gradual process than many fear and that improved social conditions actually provide an edge for the U.S. economy. For example, programs targeted at children's health and welfare make for more productive citizens in the future. Other programs prevent spending elsewhere, somewhat like Social Security prevents grown children from needing aid because they care for their parents. Fear of raising taxes on the wealthy, the authors argue, is also unfounded, because wealthy Americans are very unlikely to flee the country simply to avoid higher income taxes. They also suggest that we need not fear negative effects of spending on humane programs because we also have a say in international policy (Page and Simmons 300-305).

Political issues pose more of a challenge. To make voting easier, and thus more representative of all Americans' views, Page and Simmons suggest making voter registration a state responsibility rather than an individual one. They also decry the amount of special interest money that influences politics and they suggest that citizens' movements clamor for campaign spending restrictions. Taking Abraham Lincoln's passage from the Gettysburg Address to heart,

they close with the thought that the government must be forced to act for the people by the people (Page and Simmons 305-307).

Ehrenreich did her personal case study as a way of evaluating the seeming premise of welfare reform: that as soon as welfare recipients learned to get themselves to work everyday, they would make enough to support themselves without state aid. Ehrenreich's first conclusion is that rents are too high. She says, "When the rich and the poor compete for housing on the open market, the poor don't stand a chance" and she argues that when the market cannot provide, government should step in (Ehrenreich 199). The other side of the coin is that wages are too low, even working in 1999, when there was high demand for labor. While wages have gone up, they have not changed according to the laws of supply and demand, nor have they increased to the point of better purchasing power since the 1970s. She supposes that low-wage workers will rise up in protest eventually, setting this to rights. But, in the mean time, she argues welfare reform was a mistake. Citing the increased demand placed on food pantries and other charities as evidence, Ehrenreich's evaluation of new welfare policy is that single mothers cannot support themselves and their children on low wage work (Ehrenreich 199-221).

Shipler asks, first, do we have the capability to address the issues faced by the poor and second, do we have the determination to make those solutions a reality? He believes we have both the skill and the will to provide well-financed hospitals, schools, police departments, welfare offices, and housing authorities working together and utilizing outreach that "become portals through which the distressed could pass into a web of assistance" (Shipler 286). He sees the national government's mandate as one to preserve freedom, defend the weak, and advance justice (Shipler 285-289).

Shipler also provides concrete suggestions for solutions to many of poverty's problems. He suggests refining minimum wage laws to reflect the cost of living in different regions and raising the minimum wage. He also suggests "living wage" laws for any private company under a government contract. In an effort to raise wages, he suggests that in exchange for the tax breaks companies receive from their chosen localities; these towns could ask for higher wages rather than just job creation. In order to help workers maintain some mobility, Shipler recommends job training in both hard and soft skills, and vocational training. He points out that other industrialized nations have strong vocational high school programs and apprenticeships. While this may seem too egalitarian for Americans, it would be an improvement over the gigantic gap between the earnings of high school graduates and college graduates. He even passes judgment on the unfair distribution of funding for public schools through property taxes and attacks vouchers for private education. He also spends considerable time on the topic of insurance, challenging America to find a will and a way to craft universal coverage that will not sacrifice efficiency or innovation. Additionally, he challenges us to create a comprehensive early childhood program to improve the health and education of our nation's children (Shipler 290-298). While *The Working Poor* does not outline all the answers, it also does not simplify or belittle the problems. They are complex and interwoven and will require solutions of the same nature. It is obvious, however, that Shipler believes it is a challenge that our nation is capable of tackling.

My Assessment of the Poverty Problem

While treatment of the poor in earlier times seems inhumane by our standards today, we must judge history on its own terms rather than comparing it to present norms. Societal views on the causes of poverty have become consistently reductionist in modern times. No longer do we see caring for the poor as a holy responsibility, but as a social burden that many would like to throw off. As society has become more specialized through the centuries, it has also become more divided by stratification. It is easy for the decision makers to be far removed from the realities of the needy. Poverty, like other social issues, is so broad and so deep, that people tend to simplify it into stereotypes of the worthy poor and the lazy poor, laced with barely noticeable racism and sexism.

In reality, poverty is multifaceted. Shipler illustrates throughout his entire work that there is no single cause or effect of poverty, but that poverty's causes and effects are dependent both upon individual and circumstantial factors. The poor suffer from factors that are too big for any one person to deal with: economic vulnerability, drug and crime infested neighborhoods, inadequate medical care, abuse, a lack of opportunity, unstable families, poor nutrition, inadequate housing, sub-par educations, physical maladies, emotional stressors, and mental ailments. They also suffer from poor decisions: decisions to spend unwisely, to drop out of school, to have children too early, to try drugs, to miss work, to engage in illegal activity, to opt for the easy meal instead of the healthful one, to live or work in unsafe environments, to stew in misery instead of getting help. The fault falls both upon society and upon the individual.

Until all strata of society see poverty for what it is, our government's solutions are doomed to be insufficient. How can we improve civic education in this area? It is a tough question, and I will not presume to have a plan to implement, but I believe the answer lies in reflection. Most people in the middle class do not realize how close they are to the edge of

insolubility. Could you go six months without a paycheck? The answer for most of us is this: not without falling into poverty.

Most people think ‘I’m so lucky,’ but never ask why. How did you come to be successful? What did it take? Most people will answer with the American myth: I am a hardworking person who made the most the opportunities afforded to me. Only the individual contributions matter; all collective support is ignored. The family who met all my basic need and raised me with mainstream values and goals is only a fond memory. The influence of teachers who taught me, encouraged me, and reinforced my belief in our great nation is easy to dismiss. I can take for granted the blessing of good health. And, when I fail to think of these factors, then I will almost certainly not think of the infrastructure that supported my parent’s business and home or the fire and police protection that secured my family’s well being and safety. In reality, all of these things had a deep and profound impact upon the person I am today and the presence or absence of them matters to each individual. The realization that we all must come to is this: no one makes it alone because we are so interdependent with each other. Much, if not most, of what makes people successful – family, education, health, community – is out of their direct control.

Ideally, each year we should all spend the month before Thanksgiving in reflection and all come to this same conclusion. If we did recognize the societal structures that promote success and, in the collective spirit of the winter solstice holidays, decided that we wanted to share that success with our fellows, we could form a united voice that advocates politically for the less fortunate.

In believing in our own worthiness for what we have achieved and accumulated, we forget the people and structures that make our success possible. In suspecting the poor of idleness and irresponsibility, we forget our own motivations. Yes, people who pay taxes care

about their income, but they also work for more than a paycheck. Are we not all motivated by duty, by love of family and friends, by pride in our abilities, by our dreams and aspirations, by recognition for achievements, by our visions of a better tomorrow, and by desire for self-fulfillment? Are people in need so different that they are reduced to being only motivated by cash for food, shelter, and clothing? Do they only desire subsistence? I think not. I think they feel a sense of duty too. I think they love their family and friends. I think they take pride in their abilities. I think they want to follow their dreams and aspirations. I think they like to be recognized for their achievements. I think they have visions for the future that they would like to turn into realities. I think they work toward self-fulfillment and I think they deserve to make their own choices.

In this ideal world, I believe we would see Funicellio's solution of a guaranteed income as the best way to eliminate need in our society. Parsimony lends credence to the idea of guaranteed income. It is simple. People in need are not some subclass of humans and they do not disavow American values. They are hard workers and they love their families. They need money. They need services. Give them the money and let them choose their services. Removing the obstacle of money gives access to good doctors and psychiatric treatments, to decent housing in good neighborhoods, to time between jobs, rather than having to race to the first employer who will have them. This applies to a whole host of issues. Money provides the power of choice in our society, and we are withholding it from millions of people to the detriment of the wellbeing and potential our whole society.

A guaranteed income would also solve a host of other ills by extending choice to groups who are monetarily disadvantaged. One function of poverty is that it provides all sorts of employment and volunteer opportunities for middle class people who want to help. Money that is

set aside for the relief of the poor winds up in the pockets of people who make their living by helping. Instead, we could give the money directly to the needy and let the helping professions ply their trade in the private sector. Guaranteed income would also serve to pay mothers for their work in the home – and they do *work* in the home. In this way, women who choose to stay at home to care for their families would be able to participate fully in the marketplace. The guaranteed income would also serve as disability and unemployment insurance, allowing the disabled time to heal and the unemployed time to find the best job for them.

Guaranteed income would not be a cure all. I find it to be the most empowering solution, but there would still be a minority that will make all the wrong choices. It would be my ideal solution. My true long term goal for our nation, however, is one that I see as more politically viable. One of the main problems with our current welfare system is that it provides aid for isolated, immediate needs. If the services provided to the poor were more holistic, it would go a long way toward making the effects lasting solutions rather than quick fixes.

Social workers and educators work daily with the underprivileged, but they do not work together. Think of all the service professionals that the poor and everyone else in the community depend upon: firefighters, police, and lawyers; social workers and counselors; doctors, optometrists, and dentists; nutritionists, child development experts, daycare providers, and teachers. They all have their own offices and their own set of policies and procedures. And, they all could be useful to one another if they worked together.

I would suggest a plan along the lines of Shipler's "web of assistance" (286). I envision community centers sprinkled throughout cities and situated in each small town. These centers could house schools, daycare centers, and adult education courses, in addition to a liaison from the healthcare professions, the welfare system, and the legal system. These people would serve

as advocates for the individuals and families that come to the community center. They would provide advice, education, and references to more specific services. Those with references from the community center could receive services at a discounted rate.

In a community center approach, the school would serve as a hub that connects to all of the service professions, allowing for a multi-faceted solution to a multifaceted problem. It would allow for more personalized attention for each family unit and for more teamwork between professionals who are trying to make a difference. An added bonus would be that it would be a place that almost everyone in the community could go to for information, so there would be no shame in asking for help.

This is an achievable goal within the near future, but it will still take time and effort to achieve. The well-educated-but-busy voter that we mentioned at the beginning of this work is most likely to want an immediate cause toward which to work. In order to make changes to the system that currently stands, this voter would be best advised to take any action that would make money less important in elections, as suggested by Page and Simmons. Our best bet for changing anything in our country is to make our political voices and our votes as closely representative to our personal views as possible. In order to do that, we must limit the campaign contributions of corporations and special interests.

There are currently several efforts underway aimed at overturning a Supreme Court decision from January 2010. In the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision which effectively gave corporations the same First Amendment rights as American citizens, including free speech. This means that corporations can donate as much as they wish to a political candidate's campaign and the donation information can remain confidential. There are constitutional amendments under consideration within Congress that would reverse this decision,

by clarifying that free speech is for people only, but without the support of well-educated-but-busy voters, they will not pass.

If you want to take action immediately, a nonpartisan, nonprofit group called Public Citizen is sponsoring one of the afore mentioned amendments and you can visit their website at democracyisforpeople.org. Move to Amend is a coalition of organizations with their own similar version of an amendment. Both have information if you wish to better educate yourself on the subject and petitions available that you can sign in support of their amendments, as well as information about other ways to become involved in this cause.

Now you are armed with a working knowledge of both the ancient and recent social and political history of poverty. You can see that societal views on the causes of poverty have been consistently reductionist and thus, government solutions have been insufficient in the past. But they do not have to remain thus. I leave you with a dream, a long term goal, and an immediate goal to evaluate and work toward if you see fit.

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